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THE DRUM LANGUAGE OF THE TUMBA PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

The drum language of the Bantu tribes living in the Equatorial forest is a system of signals beaten with two sticks on a hollowed wooden drum which gives out two notes corresponding to the two tones of the vowels of the language. Use of the drum is restricted to men but is now entirely secular. The signals represent the tones of the syllables of conventional phrases of a traditional and highly poetic character. The phrases are sufficient in number that the code can be used for a large variety of messages, furnishing a means of instantaneous communication throughout a radius of several miles.

For a long time drums and horns have been employed in sending news and calling persons or groups of persons among the Bantu peoples of Central Africa. On inquiring as to the beginning of the use of the drum as a medium for conveying messages, one gets the answer: "We have always had the drum." One of my informants said that their drum language, as well as most of their folkways, came from their traditional ancestor, called in this section, Jibanza or Liyanza.

The languages differ in various localities. In spite of the fact that with the coming of the Europeans many of the people from different language groups have acquired a common *lingua franca*, the drum languages have been very little modified. Strangers going into a new locality, although their spoken language may have only slight differences, do not as a rule understand the language of the drum. However, I have found two instances where the spoken language of two tribes was not readily understood, but the drum language was so nearly identical that a member of one tribe had no difficulty in understanding the ordinary messages sent on the drum by the other tribe, except, of course, personal names.

The *lingua franca* of this section is not used on the drum except one call, "Move swiftly" (Tambola noke noke). It may mean either "come" or "go" depending on the first part of the message given in the local dialect.

The people of the Tumba tribe are situated on the east side of the Congo River directly on the equator. There are no hills, and the

dense tropical rain forest covers the whole country. It is impossible to see for a distance greater than the length of a village except up and down the river. Under these conditions the only way to convey a message by signals from one village to another without a messenger is by sound.

There are two trees commonly used for making drums, called in the lonkundo (the language spoken here), "Bosulu" and "Iyamba." The former is much more common. It is known in Europe and America as "camwood." The drums vary in size according to the diameter of the trunk of the tree, and are hewn only by men who know the art. There is, however, so far as I can learn, no restriction on learning to send messages. Many are not able to "talk on the drum," but they insist that it is because they have not taken the time to learn. Usually one learns this art during childhood, but there are two men in the village of Bolenge past middle age who are studying the drum at the present time. Most women understand all that is "said" on the drum, but it is out of their province to send a message. Women never touch the drum.

The hewing of a drum is considered an art, or even a closed profession. One who has not learned from his family will not attempt such a project. In spite of the great range in size, the drums of the tribes of Central Congo that the author has seen differ very little as to the general pattern. After a section of a tree has been cut the desired length (usually between three or four feet), the hewer flattens off a base so that the drum will lie stable. Next he slopes up each end so the drum rests only on the middle. Then on the top side a strip five or six inches wide is smoothed off. Along this strip two slots, two or three inches wide, extending to within five inches of each end of the drum, are chiseled out. In the middle they are joined by a very narrow slot so that two "lips" about four inches long are left. From the two larger slots the inside of the log is removed, leaving only a shell of hard wood. The shell is left thicker on one side than on the other, and this gives the two tones corresponding to the tones of the spoken language.

To send a message the sender stands on the side of the drum that has the lower tone. (Representatives from two tribes say that he stands on the high-tone side.) With a stick of light pulpy wood

(called bombambo) in each hand, he beats rhythmically, alternating between the high and low tones according to the words he wishes to say. Those who are especially proficient in the art of "talking" with the drum usually hum the message, thus keeping time with the beats.

The two tones are about a musical third apart and might be designated "do" and "mi." In this article the notations used for transcribing messages are: MmDd. The first, M, is high tone on right side; second, m, high tone on left side; D is low tone on right side; and fourth, d, low tone left side. Italicized tones indicate stress. Different individuals may beat the same call changing the right- and left-handed strokes, but so long as the proper tone is struck and the rhythm is maintained, each will be understood perfectly. In some calls there are simultaneous beats on both the high and low tones, producing a middle tone with considerable stress. These have not been italicized because it is the two beats that produce the stress rather than heavier strokes on the part of the beater. Such simultaneous notes are indicated by parentheses.

There is very little resonance to the drum, and the beats must of necessity all be staccato. The message is divided into phrases and the corresponding drum-code set opposite each phrase. This method has one defect in that it does not show the rhythm accurately. There is no standard tempo. Just as one person may talk more rapidly than another, so he may beat the drum with a quicker time.

The wording of the message on the drum is usually longer than the oral statement of the same message. For example, the name of one of the author's informants is Ekebe Jacob. However, his drum name is:

efoma ntolaka la nkesa,	dMdmMmMdMm
Ekebe is'ea Bidzo	ddMdmddM

Coffin is not brought out (of forest) in the morning,
Ekebe, father of Bidzo.

All of the men of importance in the village have drum names. In fact, no evidence has been found to show that any man is forbidden to choose a drum name for himself. As may be seen from the above example, the drum name of a person usually consists of a motto (which usually describes some characteristic of the individual) fol-

lowed by his spoken name. The drum name of the village of Bolenge is:

Bolenge wa kala kala	dDdMDdDd
basek'Elenge	dMMdM

Bolenge of long ago
people of (it also means children of) Elenge.

It must be borne in mind that the drum language has never before been transcribed, and like the folk tales there is little emphasis on verbal accuracy. This fact adds to the difficulty the novice encounters in comprehending the various codes. Two individuals may send the same communication with slight modifications in the wording. Some persons add extra beats between phrases in order to maintain the proper rhythm. This is doubly confusing to the learner.

As to the types of messages that were sent on the drum, there seems to be unanimous agreement that in former times the chief purpose of the drum was to call people together for fighting. However, when the occasion demanded, it was possible to inform neighboring villages of any incident.

At the beginning of all messages a certain series of beats is used to call attention to the drum. The same series is repeated when the message is finished. The sender may pause at intervals between phrases, but the hearer will continue to listen until he "signs off." In former days MMMMMD preceded and ended a call to fight. Now it means only attention, but is most commonly used with assembly calls. Other calls are usually introduced and ended by MmMmMmMm or some variation of it. These beats will not be included in the following calls, but it must be remembered that attention must be called to the fact that a message is about to be sent if people are to be expected to hear what is "said" without missing part of it.

There are many variations of assembly calls, but the following is a typical one:

esombe langangala	DmMmMm
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The shaman is in full regalia.

The call may be repeated in rapid succession as many times as desired and has the significance of a bell. It is also used as the evening curfew on stations occupied by white men.

When one awakes in the morning he may send greetings to a friend or "say" farewell to his bed:

itoko la mbete ochikalakaoo ddMdMmdMdDdM

Mat and bed, "goodbye."

This may be followed by greetings to his friends, or he may tell of his plans for the day. For example, if he wished to say "good morning" to the chief he would add it to the above message:

Bongese is'ea Ntuka ddMdMdMm
 boseka jokulaka dDd(dM)dDd
 betsw oetswo dMddMd

Bongese father of Ntuka
 companion of elders
 are you awake? are you awake?

If he wished to add a special honor he might ask for the chief's motto:

nkosangela te losako MdDdDdMd

I say to you, Salaam.

The chief would not reply with his motto but would say:

ambyaka lotefela MMMdMdD
 choka fole fole fole. MddMdMdM

Cease speaking.
 We hear clearly.

When one has been visiting his friends and has started home his host may send him a farewell greeting while he is on the way. He will "say" after calling the name of his friend:

nkosesa beseso MdMddMd
 ochwaka okendakao d(dM)ddMdDdM

I say farewell to you
 (farewell greetings) you go? you are going?

A morning greeting to the Belgian government official is:

ikongo ifonge kukola dDdMMdMdDd
 baseka Ntange dMMdM
 oetswo oetswo olenk'anko dMddMddMdMd

A stinging caterpillar is not good disturbed
 people of Ntange;
 are you awake? are you awake? are you there?

Ntange (bed) was the native name of one of the early officials in this section of Congo. Many Europeans who have spent a long time in Congo and are highly respected by the natives have been given drum names. The personal name precedes "ikongo ifonge kukola," which is applied to all Europeans.

On some occasions, when it was necessary to send word secretly to another village, the name of Europeans was changed to:

ejim'ondele boseka jokulaka dMdMmdDd(dM)dDd

Venerable white man companion of chiefs.

This was done to prevent the native soldiers or assistants of the white man from intercepting the message.

The call to bring people together to fight is:

ki ki ki ki ki ki	<i>MMMMMD</i>
bokumba kelekwa	<i>ddMdMM</i>
okemyaka loke lokolo	<i>dMddMMdDd</i>
ki ki ki ki ki	<i>MMMMD</i>
bobala boikongo la ngilima	<i>dDddMdMdMdM</i>
okanaka ntolote	<i>dMddMdM</i>
ki ki ki ki ki ki	<i>MMMMMD</i>

Make the drum strong;
strengthen your legs,
spear, shaft and head,
and the noise of moving feet;
think not to run away.

If one wished to warn his friends in a neighboring village that men were going to fight with them, or during the rubber war days if soldiers were coming, he would call the name of the village and then say:

loalaka lonselenge	<i>DdDdDmMm</i>
etaf'eteta	<i>dMMMd</i>

Behold they are on the path.
The branch is breaking.

A call that one hears very often in the evening is a farewell greeting to the sun:

bongolo ngolo bojefa	<i>dMmMmMMd</i>
osalaki lifeta nda loola	<i>MmMmDdDMdMD</i>

akendaki bonteke biekinsanse	MdMMdDd(dM)dMM
nkesa nkesa	MmMm
mbile mbile	dMdM
bokolo bosokita	dDdMdDd
ochwaka okendakao	d(dM)ddDddM

Shining sun, who has made a dwelling in the sky,
 who has gone to the concourse of counsel,
 all morning,
 all day,
 evening comes,
 you are going,
 good-bye.

The call for men to go hunting is:

tolenk'ane nde	MddM
kala kala kala kala	DdDdDdDd
bopele pele bojende	dDdDdMdD
bojanga nda lisoko	dMdMdMd
empeta nda lokondo	dDdMddM
tolanga lofiko lonyama	MdddMdMdD
lole nda tonkilingonda	ddMdMmDd
tosalaki mpambe la mboloko	MmMmdMdMmM
tofolange bekisanse mbil'ene	MMdMddMdMmM
betema besooa la nzala	dMdMdMMdDd
bele nde fole fole	ddMdMdM

We have been here
 since long ago,
 men with nets on shoulders,
 knives at their sides,
 we want some meat
 which is in the forest
 where the antelopes lived (drum name for forest)
 we don't want to stay at home today,
 our stomachs are dying of hunger.
 They are empty.

If they had a successful hunt the neighboring villages will be told
 about it thus:

tokema bolo bolo bolo	MMdMmMmMm
toosena balongo safala	MdMddMMdDd
lofiko lonyama jimaka	
tonkilingonda	dMdMdDMmMmdMmDd
tosalaki mpambe la mboloko	MmMmdMdMmM

lofiko lonyama loleka nd'onanga	dMdMdDMddMdM
teleke teleke	dDddDd

We feel strong,
we have seen blood spilled
about some meat from the forest,
some meat goes to the village.

When people in another village hear the call they may reply:

tosoka fole fole fole	MMddMdMdM
lonchikelaka lofiko lonyama	dMdDddMdMdD
betema besooowa la nzala	dMdMdMMdDd
bele nde fole fole	ddMdMdM
loalaka lonselenge	DdDddMmM
tole nda mboka	ddMMd

We hear clearly,
save some meat for me,
stomachs are dying of hunger,
they are empty.
Behold they are on the path.
We are on the path.

If one wishes to buy some fish he may call to a fisherman,

elinga l'enjale	dMMdMm
talotefelake la nkesa	dDMmMmdMm
lombonge lokombwa	dDdMdD
osangelaka (bolengo bochwaki lifeta nda loola)	dDdDddMdMMDdMdMd
oalaka lonselenge	DdDdDdMmM
tole nda mboka	ddMMd
ochikelaka beningo la nkaka	dMdDdddMdDd
besalaki lifeta elinga l'enjale	MmMmMdDdMMdMm
botema bosooowa la nzala	dMdMdMMdDd
bele nde fole fole	ddMdMdM

River,
do not speak in morning
until the fog lifts,
tell (name of Bontaci, a Bolenge fisherman)
behold they are on the path.
We are on the path.
Save the minnows.
Our stomachs are dying of hunger.
They are empty.

The fisherman may send a reply, and if the fish are all gone he will say:

beningo la nkaka basosimba	ddMdDdMdMd
bosila fe fe	MdMdMM

The minnows are all finished.

When the chief calls the men out to do special work he will say:

bopele pele bojende	dDdDdMdD
lotakana lotakana	dMmMdMmM
tokende benteke biesala	MdDdDdMdMm

Men,
come together, come together,
let us go to work.

If the occasion demands he may tell the people what the work is to be. For example, if a house is to be roofed the call is as follows:

bopele pele bojende	dDdDdMdD
loetswo loetswo	dMddMd
joka fole fole	MddMdM
lokeko lokomak'ampulu ja	
lonkoko	dMdmMmMdMdMdd
njesangela te,	MdDdDd
la nkesa la mpombola	dMmdDdD
tekendake tonkilingonda	ddMMdMmDd
tekendake elinga l'enjale	ddMMdMMdMm
tole nda bonteke wa bosala	ddMdDdMdMm
totela tolombe	MMdMdD
lotakana lotakana	dMmMdMmM
la nkesa la mpombola totela	
tolombe	dMmdDdDMMdMdD

Men, are you awake?
Listen! (Name of another man, Lonkoko)
I say to you,
in the morning at dawn
do not go to the forest,
do not go to the river.
We are at work.
We are roofing houses.
Come together, come together,
in the morning at dawn
we will roof some houses.

When it is necessary for the chief to call a council of the elders of the village he will say:

lotakana lotakana	dMmMdMmM
tekendake elinga l'enjale	ddMMdMMdMm
tekendake tonkilingonda	ddMMdMmDd
tolanga nde benteke beetefela	
mposo	MddMdDdMdMdDdD
bimaki ikongo ifonge kukola	MmMmdDdMMdMdDd
baseka ntange	dMMdM

Come together, come together;
do not go to the river,
do not go to the forest,
we want some meetings
to talk over affairs
from the government officials.

The call for men and women to come to school in the morning is:

bopele pele bojende	dDdDdMdD
boseka woliana	dDdMdMdD
loetswo loetswo	dMddMd
tokende bonteke wa sukulu	MdDdDdMdMd
tofolange benteke b'itoko la	
mbete	MMdMdDd(dM)dMdMm

Men and women
are you awake? Are you awake?
let us go to school.
We do not want meeting with mat and bed:

The call to a Protestant church service is:

(ikongo ifonge kukola	dDdMMdMdDd
baseka engambe ea njambola)	
lotakana lotakana	dMMdMdMdMmMdmMdMdM
tokende bonteke bolosambo	MdDdDdMdMd
bole nda ikongo ifonge kukola	ddMdDdMMdMdDd

(Protestants)
come together, come together.
Let us go to the church service
which is where the white man is found.

The Catholic call differs only in the name for Catholics which is:

etaf'enjolo baseka mpelu	dMdMmdMMdD
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Strong branch children of fathers

The call to bring people to plays and dances is:

bolenge wa kala kala	dDdMDdDd
basek'elenge	dMMdM
lokema bolo bolo	dMdMmMm
tofolange benteke bitoko la mbete	MMdMdDd(dM)dMdMm
tolanga nde benteke bolokolo	MddMdDdMdDd
bopele pele bojende	dDdDdMdD
boseka woliana elenge l'onkosi	dDdMdMdDddMmMd
tososila felele	dMddMmM
toleka kala kala	MddMDdDd
itoko la mbete ochikalaka	ddMdMmdMdDd

Bolenge, strengthen yourselves,
we don't like meetings with mat and bed.
We want gatherings for dancing.
Men, women, children,
we have all gone.
We left long ago.
Mat and bed remain behind.

During the dance a steady rhythm is maintained on the drum as follows:

DmMmDmMm

Other types of drums are used for accompaniment also.

If the affair is a drinking feast the following is the call used:

batoko fala fala fala	ddMdDdDdD
tokema bolo bolo bolo	MMdMmMmMm
benteke bimbongolo nkombola	dDd(dM)dMdMdD
tomelo benteke bimbongolonkombola	MdDdDd(dM)dMdMdD
bale nda likutu bolo bolo bolo kwo	ddMdMdMmMmMm(dM)
tomelo kwo kotuku kwo	MdD(dM)MmM(dM)
tomelo mbole kwo kotu ku kwo	MdDdM(dM)MmM(dM)
etaf'enjolo	dMdMm
bonanga bokendaki la mbanza lokalak'engongo	dDdMdMmdDddMddMM
tomela nkesa nkesa nkesa	MdDMmMmMm
tomela mbile mbile mbile	MdDdMdMdM
betafosila	dMdMMd
bele nda likutu bolo bolo	ddMdMdMmMm

The mats are rolled up,
 we strengthen ourselves at drinking feasts,
 let us drink, drinking bouts.
 It is strong in the pots,
 [let us drink(kwo etc.) cannot be translated. Possibly archaic words.]
 (Name of man giving the feast), you are thirsty
 We drink in the morning
 We drink all day.
 It is not finished.
 It is strong in the pots.

If a man is lost in the forest his friends will call to him:

tonkilingonda tosalaki mpambe	dMmDdMmMmdM
tetefelake	DdMmMm
loyala fole fole fole	dDddMdMdM
kela chesangele mposho nda lokole	dMdMdMmdDdMddM
losangelaka (ilonga ndengela is'ea'benge)	dDdDddMdMmMdMdMd
tandema la mboka	MmMmMd
tofokena osokela mo	MMdMddMdMd
okendaki tonkilingonda	MdMmdMmDd
nkesa nkesa mbile mbile	MmMmdMdM
bokolo bookita	dDdMdDd
tofokena ol'enko	MMdMddMd
tandema la mboka	MmMmMd
teo tokendake itoko la mbete	MdddMMddMdMm
tonkilingonda	dMmDd
itoko la mbete ile nda bobila wa fole fole fole	ddMdMmddMdDdMdMdMdM
tandema la mboka	MmMmMd
teo toketaki kolo kolo	MdMdMmMMmMm
toketaki kala kala tofokena	MdMmMDdDdMMdM
osokela mo	ddMdMd

Forest, where the gazelle labored,
 do not speak,
 remain quiet,
 let us tell you in the voice on the drum.
 Tell, (drum name of certain man),
 come onto the trail
 We don't see you,
 what are you doing?
 You went into the forest,
 all morning, all day,

evening falls,
 we don't see you, where are you?
 Get onto the trail.
 Come, do not go to mat and bed in the forest.
 Mat and bed are in the open village.
 Come.
 We called you constantly.
 We called you long ago.
 We don't see you.
 Where are you?

In case a person is seriously ill the relatives will be called, thus:

bakanga ba kala kala basek'	
ompanga	dMMMdDdDdMMdD
talotefelake la nkesa	DdMmMmdMm
lombonge lokombwa	dDdMdD
losangelaka bolengo ochwaki	
lifeta nda loola	dDdDddMdMmMdDdMdMd
toketa	MMdM
tandema la mboka	MmMmMd
teo bielo losika ja waji	MddMddDdMmM
afokende la mpamba la bolo	MMdMddMdMm
ale nd'itoko la mbete	ddMddMdMm
ale nde tompole	ddMdDd
tokendake benteke biekisanse	
elinga l'enjale	ddMMdDddMdMdMdMMdMm
tandema la mboka	MmMmMd
tambola kwa kwa	MmMdd
te tokinake lokole	MddMMddM

Bakanga (name of village across the river from Bolenge),
 do not speak in the morning,
 the fog is lifting.
 Tell (name of man)
 we are calling you.
 Come.
 Your wife is sick.
 She has no strength.
 She is on a mat and bed.
 She is indeed unable to care for herself.
 Do not go fishing.
 Come.
 Come quickly.
 Do not overlook the drum.

At the birth of a child, if it is a boy the call is:

batoko fala fala	ddMdDdD
tokema bolo bolo bopele pele	MMdMmMmdDdDd
bojende bokataka likonga la	
nguwa	MdDdMMMddMdDd
imaki tonkilingonda	MmMmdMmDd
ale nda bobila wa fole fole	ddMdDdMdMdM
asokoka l'isika koke koke	MdDddMMdMdM

The mats are rolled up,
we feel strong,
a man who holds a spear and a shield
came from the forest.
He is in the open village,
That is enough for this time.

If the child is a girl the call differs only in the name of woman instead of that of man. To repeat the whole call it is,

batoko fala fala	ddMdDdD
tokema bolo bolo	MmdMmMm
boseka woliana	dDdMdMd
imaki tonkilingonda	MmMmdMmDd
ale nda bobila wa fole fole	ddMdDdMdMdM
asokoka l'isika koke koke	MdDddMMdMdM

The mats are rolled up,
we feel strong,
a woman
came from the forest,
she is in the open village.
That is enough for this time.

If twins are born the regular call is given with the following added:

ocho bicho ocho bichcho	MdMdMdMd
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This is not translatable; it is possibly archaic.

At the death of a man the call is:

bopele pele bojende asowa	dDdDdMdDMdM
tokaka tokali	dMMddM
tosoka bonkita nkele nkele nkele	MdMddMdDdDdDd

A man has died,
the feet are turned up.
We feel heart sorrow.

When a certain young man of Bolenge village who was a fisherman died, the following call was given to bring his friends to the funeral plays:

Ilangi lofoso y'ongonda	MdMdDdMdDD
la nkesa la mpombolo	dMmdDdD
tofolange benteke biesala	MMdMdDdMdMm
tolanga bonteke bolokolo bole nda	
elinga l'enjale baenga	MdDdDdMdDdddMdMMdMmdMd
hasaki l'okala bopele pele	MdMMdDddDdDd
bojende bosalaki lifeta bolenge	
wa kala kala	MdDMmMmdDddDdMDdDd
tekendake tonkilingonda	ddMMdMmDd
tekendake beningo la nkaka	
elinga l'enjale	ddMMddMdDddMMdMm
tolanga bonteke bolokolo bole	
nda elinga l'enjale	MdDdDdMdDdddMdMMdMm
la nkesa la mpombolo	dMmdDdD

Bongonda, the sub-chief,
 in the morning at dawn
 we do not want gatherings for work,
 we want a meeting of play on the river.
 Men who live in Bolenge
 do not go to the forest,
 do not go fishing.
 We want a meeting of play on the river
 in the morning at dawn.

The calls recorded serve to show the principal underlying the drum language. To give all of the possible combinations of words and messages would require a large volume. As was stated in the beginning one seldom finds two persons who beat messages in exactly the same order. In fact the same person often changes the wording of a message. The calls given above, although few, are sufficient to show the variety of messages which are sent on the drum. However, the wealth of possible combinations would make a more exhaustive study very worth while.